

UKMA news

The newsletter of the UK Metric Association:
campaigning for a **single** *rational* system of measurement

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www.ukma.org.uk

May 2005

40 YEARS OF COLLECTIVE FAILURE

May 2005 marks exactly **FOUR DECADES** since Parliament announced its plan for Britain to adopt the metric system over a **TEN-YEAR** period.

When the President of the Board of Trade stood up in the House of Commons on 24 May 1965 to announce that Britain would be going metric over the following decade, he probably would have been ridiculed if he had

Also in this issue:

- **Think Metric website launched**
- **Letter from the Chairman**
- **Irish change to km cost less than original estimate**
- **Fridges slowly moving to litres**
- **2005 AGM & Conference**



suggested that five governments and six Prime Ministers later, we would still only be halfway there.

Since then, Britain has been left behind in an embarrassing way, having long been overtaken by every other Commonwealth country, though they all started their conversion programmes *after* Britain. Ten years was not at all unrealistic, as Australia's complete conversion from 1970-1980 shows as a shining example. With the right collective will and leadership, the same success story could have been achieved here.

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40 YEARS OF GOING METRIC

from page 1

Traffic signage was originally planned to go metric more than 30 years ago, but even now metric units are still not authorised on the majority of official traffic signs.

Significantly, this government has taken no action whatsoever to finish the process of our conversion. In January 2000, it oversaw the coming into force of a law passed under the previous Conservative administration—namely for loose food such as meat and vegetables—to be sold per kg. Apart from that, nothing else has been achieved in the period 1997-2005. It is therefore hoped that in this unprecedented third successive Labour term, the freshly re-elected government will 'grasp the nettle' and finish the job properly.

UKMA recognises that the issue of metrication has been made unpopular in Britain, due to its politicisation and perceived connection to the EU. Critics of metrication say that it would be a brave government that announced its intention to replace miles with kilometres, or pints of milk with litres.

But is metrication really that unpopular? UKMA believes that when it comes to the crunch, the issue of completing metrication pales into insignificance beside major issues such as foundation hospitals, student tuition fees and the Iraq war. UKMA obviously takes no view on such matters, but we find it incomprehensible that a government can be prepared to take unpopular decisions on these controversial issues yet lacks the courage to carry through a simple change which was begun with all-party consent 40 years ago.

Britain's long journey to metric

The story really began in 1862, when a House of Commons Select Committee recommended the adoption of metric units for public administration. Following this there were numerous official reports and attempts to legislate. Finally, in 1965, the Federation of British Industry suggested to the Government that the time had come to adopt the principle of full metrication. From then, the story goes as follows:

1965 Board of Trade announces intention for Britain to go metric over a ten-year period

1968 Metrication Board established

1970 Conservatives win power, with Edward Heath as PM

1970 Plans to convert road signs cancelled

1972 White Paper on metrication advocates gradual, voluntary change

1973 UK enters EEC

1974 Labour wins power—Harold Wilson PM

1974 Metric becomes compulsory in schools

1976 James Callaghan replaces Harold Wilson

1979 Margaret Thatcher wins for the Conservatives

1979 Metrication Board abolished

1980 Most Commonwealth countries have completed metrication

1989 EU agrees to longer timescale for UK and Ireland to complete metrication

1990 John Major replaces Margaret Thatcher

1995 Most packaged goods required to state quantity in metric units

1997 Labour wins election—Tony Blair becomes PM

2000 Goods sold loose from bulk to be weighed, measured and priced in metric. "Supplementary Indications" permitted until 2009

So what remains to be done?

We would suggest the following (not in any priority order):

- Consolidation of progress so far. There is a real danger of regression if the existing law continues to be inadequately enforced. Many Trading Standards Departments seem to turn a blind eye to flouting of the law by small shops and market traders. Without proper enforcement the law could increasingly be ignored - thus making it even more difficult for shoppers to compare prices and value for money
- Advertising and product description (including in the property market) should be required to be in metric units
- "Supplementary indications" should be phased out as planned (pressure to extend the time limit yet again should be resisted)
- Speed limits and road signage should be converted to metres, km and km/h
- All public sector bodies (and all contractors on public works and all bodies receiving public money) should be required to work exclusively in metric units

Above all there needs to be a commitment from Government that, after a century and a half (never mind four decades), they really mean it this time, that they will explain why it is in the national interest, and that they will not be deflected by political stunts.

LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Readers,

Post-election strategy

In the aftermath of the General Election members of UKMA will no doubt be wondering what the implications are for our campaign for "a single, rational system of measurement." UKMA is of course politically independent, and we do not take sides. Nevertheless it is probably fair to say that right wing populism does not appear to have had a decisive influence in the election, and we should welcome that. We therefore have reason to hope that the reshuffled Labour government may be more prepared to listen to the voice of reason.

As I said in my New Year Message (quoted in detail in the Mail on Sunday), this post election period is a window of opportunity to persuade politicians to make brave decisions which they might shrink from if they fear that they will thereby lose votes in an imminent election. So now is the time to redouble the campaign:

- write to your MP (using the prompts on our website if you like)
- write to newspapers both local and national
- join in radio phone-ins
- complain to Trading Standards Departments about traders who break the law
- ask your library to stock VBM (ISBN No is 0750310146)
- draw attention to the 40th anniversary on 24 May (see below)
- participate in government consultations (NB - the consultation on the BBC Charter is open until 31 May) - *See Page 7*
- Your Committee is also planning new initiatives which must remain confidential for the time being (apologies to the Mail on Sunday).

40th anniversary

Incredibly, on 24 May it will be 40 years since the President of the Board of Trade announced that Britain was to go metric within 10 years. The media love anniversaries, so there is a good chance that

some will take notice of the occasion (BBC Radio 4 have already done a 15-minute piece). UKMA will be issuing a press release, and I hope members will also do what they can - especially locally. Points to stress are:

- We are in this half-metric, half-imperial mess because successive Governments failed at the outset to act decisively to make it happen (contrast Australia, New Zealand, etc). They should have legislated - not tried to do it gradually and voluntarily, hoping nobody would notice.
- The current situation is absurd and untenable (say why in your own words). Every country needs a system of measurement: nobody needs two systems. We cannot go on forever with the two-systems muddle. The newly re-elected Government must sort it out.
- Although people are afraid of change and prefer what they know, METRIC IS NOT DIFFICULT. When you are used to it, you will find it a much better system.
- It is not a European issue. Australia and Canada did not go metric because they are in Europe—neither are European countries.

Annual Conference

This is another reminder of our Annual Conference and AGM on 9 July in London. I shall be travelling down from Scotland and I hope to meet a good turnout of members. We shall get the necessary AGM business over as quickly as possible and devote most of the time to discussion and debate on current and strategic issues. The agenda is not settled yet, but it may include:

- Post-election strategy
- Supplementary indications and the American Fair Packaging and Labeling Act
- Options for UKMA's constitution (e.g. charitable status, company limited by guarantee)
- Using the Freedom of Information Act
- Website progress report
- Road signs - another British mess
- Other suggestions/requests are welcome.

Our Parliamentary supporters have been invited, and Lord Howe has indicated that he may be able to put in an appearance. It should be an enjoyable event.

Robin Paice

NEW PAGES ADDED TO UKMA WEBSITE

The UKMA web site continues to be developed and improved. Some of the newer features include:

- New front page layout includes some links to highlight new items and a 'pick of the month' section to give previous casual visitors something else to look at.
- A completely new "What you can do" section. This contains advice on writing to MPs including sample letters, and suggestions for other ways people can help—useful for visitors mindful to help but who don't necessarily wish to join UKMA.
- The references section now includes a layperson's guide to the definitions of SI units, focusing on those typically used in everyday life.
- The page on metric-only measuring tapes now lists 6 suppliers
- New endorsements from Derek Pollard, a new member, and Peter Gordon a New Zealand chef
- A new page illustrating the difference in the way that currency decimalisation was handled in comparison to metric. It contrasts this with the way the same two issues were managed in Australia.

The site is now being recognised as a useful resource and other organisations are starting to provide links to it.

We would welcome contributions (subject to review and approval by the Website Working Group) to our practical help section where the experience and expertise of members may be valuable.

www.ukma.org.uk

AIRBUS A380 TAKES OFF

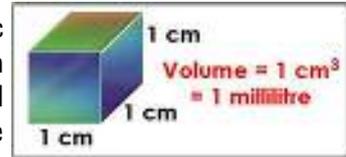
The world's biggest ever airplane made a successful maiden voyage on 27 April 2005. With a wingspan of 80 metres, 73 metres long, and 24 metres high, its double-deck design will enable it to carry up to 800 passengers. Its fuel consumption is 3 litres per 100 km—per passenger!



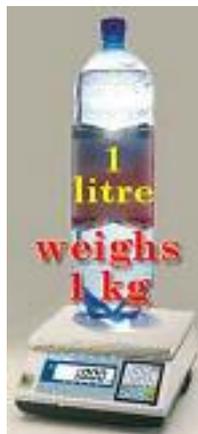
SISTER WEBSITE LAUNCHED

Think Metric!

A new think-metric site has been launched, designed to help people assimilate and use



metric instinctively as they might previously have done in imperial. It is aimed primarily at people who have not been educated in metric and need a bit of guidance, but has something for everyone interested in improving their knowledge and ability to visualise in metric.



Ideas and suggestions for improvements and enhancements would be welcome from members - particularly those with non-

technical or teaching backgrounds, able to see things from the learner's point of view.

www.thinkmetric.org.uk



THE TIMES IS MILES OUT

The Times newspaper recently proved the pitfalls of persistently converting raw metric data into imperial "for the benefit of readers". An article on 4 May featured a chart showing the relative fatality rate for motorcycle, car, air and rail travel. The base figures were in *fatalities per billion kilometres*.

If it was really necessary, any conversion should have multiplied the data by 1.61 to change the figures into *fatalities per billion miles*—instead of which, the journalist responsible made the mistake of dividing the figure by 1.61, giving a result which was more than 2.5 times lower than the true number of fatalities per billion miles. This is a huge error, and could so easily have been avoided by simply leaving the data in metric.

FRIDGES IN LITRES

UKMA welcomes the fact that the latest edition of the printed Argos catalogue now gives refrigerator and freezer capacities in litres, rather than in cubic feet.

In addition, the figures given are for the NET (i.e. usable) volume. This contrasts with the practice in the rest of the industry (both manufacturers and retailers) of using cubic feet to state the gross volume—a somewhat useless figure, as a significant proportion of that space is taken up by the pump, shelving and light.

The industry has had the advantage of being able to capitalise on the dual measurement system in use in this country, which has resulted in customers thinking they are getting an appliance with a larger storage capacity than is in fact the case. This occurs because the volume is generally promoted in advertisements and on the packaging, in cubic feet (only in smaller print is the consumer notified that this figure refers to the gross volume), and then inside the instruction manual stating the net volume—this time in litres, which cleverly masks the fact that there is a difference between net and gross capacities of up to 20%.

In the interests of consumer protection, UKMA would like to see other retailers and manufacturers of fridges to follow Argos's example, by always giving the NET volume, and always stating it in litres.

Taking this example of a fridge advertised as "4.2 cubic feet", ask the retailer what the capacity is in litres. If they tell you it holds 120 litres (the exact result of using the conversion factor of 28.3 litres per cubic foot), point to the Energy Label, which should be displayed, where it says it holds 96 litres. Then ask the salesperson where the extra 24 litres came from. Go on, try it!



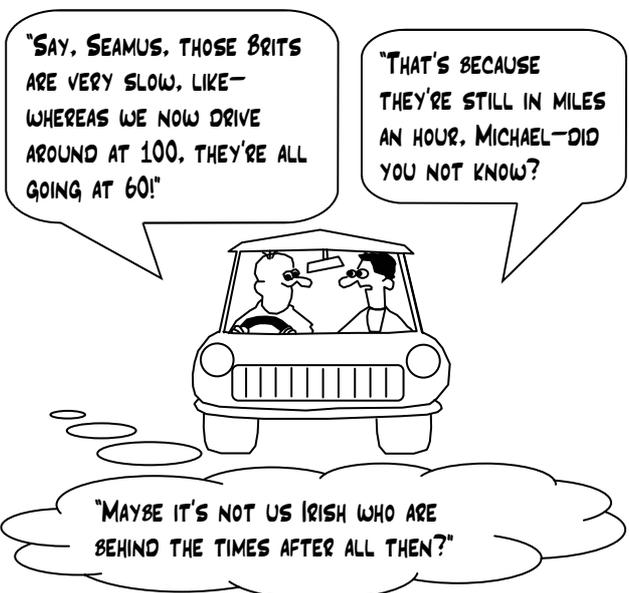
IRISH CHANGE COST LESS THAN PLANNED



UKMA is pleased to report that the changeover in the Irish Republic from speed limits denoted in miles per hour, in favour of ones showing kilometres per hour (km/h) cost less than originally estimated.

The Irish Department of Transport had budgeted €9 million for the cost of replacing the signs, accompanied by a €2 million public awareness campaign. The cost of this public information campaign came in at slightly higher than the original estimate (at €2.5 million), but the cost of replacing the signs themselves was under €8 million, bringing the total to around €10.5 million, rather than the forecast €11 million.

UKMA has been keeping in touch with the transport ministry in Ireland, and has received no further reports on how successful the changeover has been. As it is now three months since the conversion, and no press reports have come to light, we can only conclude that it has been an outstanding success. As they say, no news is good news—especially where the British press is concerned.



YORKSHIRE POST - POSITIVE ARTICLE

The following article appeared in the Yorkshire Post on 1 February. Unfortunately there was no room in last month's UKMA news, so it is reproduced now instead.

It's Time to End Britain's Half-Measures

Almost four decades ago, the British Government announced to Parliament that Britain was going to adopt the metric system. This announcement was the result of strong lobbying by the Federation of British Industry (now CBI) who wanted Britain to adopt the metric system in order to be internationally competitive. This decision had cross-party support and was seen – along with decimalisation of currency – as a welcome modernisation. It also had nothing to do with Britain joining the EEC eight years later, though when Britain joined in 1973 it simply confirmed its existing policy to adopt metric.

In 2005, despite industry using the metric system almost exclusively since the 1970s and two generations of metric-educated children, Britain is in a part-metric, part-imperial measurement mess. Beer is sold in cans and bottles with metric sizes but must be sold draught in pints. Road signs and roads are designed in metric but road signs must show distances and restrictions in imperial. Children learn metric in the classroom but face imperial outside the school gate. Walkers using OS maps use a kilometre grid but have footpath signs marked in miles and yards.

In 1971, Britain made a rapid, compulsory and effective switch from £sd to decimal currency. This was achieved through a very good changeover plan supported by lots of information for the general public. Every household in the UK was issued with an information booklet and in the final stages there were information programmes on radio and TV. The public had a 'sharp shock' but very rapidly mastered the change and never looked back.

Despite the successful example of decimalisation, successive governments have planned the metric changeover using exactly the opposite approach. The initial plans were diluted and replaced with voluntary measures in the retail sector. Various derogations (temporary opt-outs) were negotiated to delay introduction of metric units in different areas. When metric units became compulsory for pricing and weighing loose goods in 2000, there were no information programmes on radio and TV and very

few leaflets distributed to help the public make the change. It is no wonder that many people thought the changes were made by stealth and that some market traders rebelled!

Other countries have shown that changing from imperial to metric can be straightforward. Most Commonwealth countries followed Britain's lead on metrication and planned their own conversions. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa changed over smoothly within a decade. The Republic of Ireland completed their changeover to metric road signage on 20 January.

The Irish government has been replacing imperial distance signs with metric ones as they wear out – a low cost approach over the last decade. Their final step was to introduce metric speed limits. Very sensibly they planned to combine the switch with an improved safety campaign. Money that is invested should both pay for the metric conversion and provide real benefits to motorists.

Britain, meanwhile, is stuck in an 'imperial timewarp'. Our motor cars are designed with metric dimensions, our roads, signs and markings are metric. Yet metric units remain largely forbidden on the signs themselves. Department of Transport claims that metric signage could be



confusing for motorists who lack a metric education; but do people really need to go to school to learn that there are 1 000 metres in a kilometre?

Ironically, millions of older imperial-educated motorists have happily driven on holiday on the Continent, in Australia, Asia or Africa. There are no reports of mass confusion with kilometres! Indeed with ever increasing cross-Channel traffic, Britain's isolation on units means that more and more journeys require mixing (and confusing) imperial and metric. With the changeover in Ireland this month there will also be a land border with a metric country for the first time.

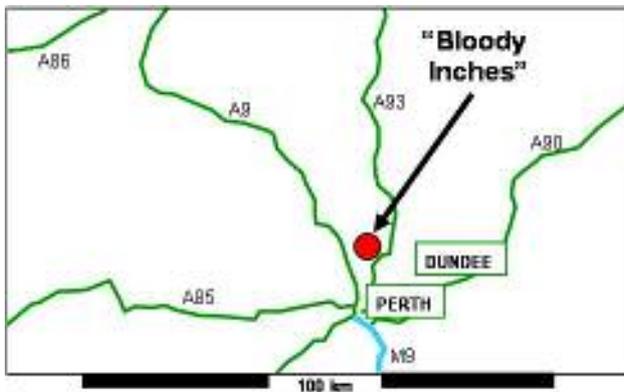
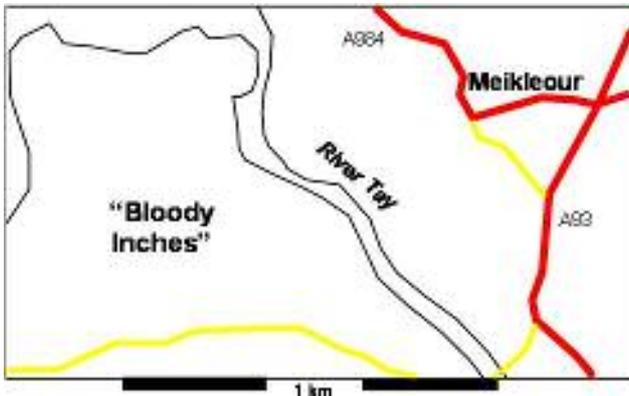
The Government has a national changeover plan to adopt the Euro even though no decision has been taken to proceed. Yet despite the fact that Britain is obliged to set a date to adopt metric road signage, there is no changeover plan! In this vacuum the costs of changeover may be increased by bad planning.

Ireland has *not* lost its heritage and culture by adopting metric speed limits and signs. Britain would not either. It is time that we followed Australia, New Zealand and now Ireland and modernise our measurement. Modern Britain needs modern metric units – we should stop being sentimental about units from a bygone imperial era.

“BLOODY INCHES”

I BEG YOUR PARDON? No, this is not an exasperated cry of frustration from one of our members. It is in fact the name of a place, west of Meikleour (north of Perth), in Scotland. National Grid ref.: NO 1438.

UKMA is humorously debating the idea of relocating its headquarters there. Please see Ordnance Survey Landranger Map 53 for proof that the place exists! Although not clear from the map what it denotes, it is likely to be a farm, but if any member happens to be nearby, perhaps they could check it out.



“WEATHER” IT’S HOT OR
COLD, THIS HELPS
TO REMEMBER CELSIUS:

30's HOT
20's NICE
10's COOL
Zero's ICE

BBC CHARTER—HAVE YOUR SAY

As you may be aware the BBC Charter is under review. On 2 March 2005, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport published a Green Paper containing options for the future of the BBC. A consultation is running until **31 May** and it is possible to respond via the web, by e-mail or by post. But please be quick.

The mission of the BBC has traditionally been to ‘inform, educate, entertain’ although little detail has been provided to flesh out these broad goals.

In our view the BBC has failed in its ‘inform, educate’ role on the question of measurement units. For example, after more than three decades of meteorologists standardising on Celsius, the BBC still provides Fahrenheit temperatures rather than educating those who have difficulty with Celsius on what Celsius temperatures mean.

Worse still, imperial is almost exclusively used for programmes describing people’s heights, weights, etc. This is despite our schools using metric for the same quantities for 30 years. Broadcasting in imperial on issues taught in metric at school directly undermines education and flies in the face of the BBC’s official mission. When responding to the consultation, please feel free to give your own favourite examples of the BBC’s measurement mess.

UKMA believes that it is important that the BBC Trust ensures that programmes do not undermine what is taught in schools and consumer protection.

The Green Paper can be downloaded from:

www.bbccharterreview.org.uk/have_your_say/green_paper/greenpaper_home.html

or you can request a copy of the Green Paper by ringing 020 7211 6200 (Mon to Fri only)

You can respond by post by sending any comments to:

BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
LONDON
SW1Y 5DH, or by email to:

bbccharterreview@culture.gsi.gov.uk

AGM 2005

Our Annual General Meeting and Conference will be held on Saturday 9 July. The venue is the University of Westminster, 32-38 Wells Street, London W1T 3UW. *See map below.*

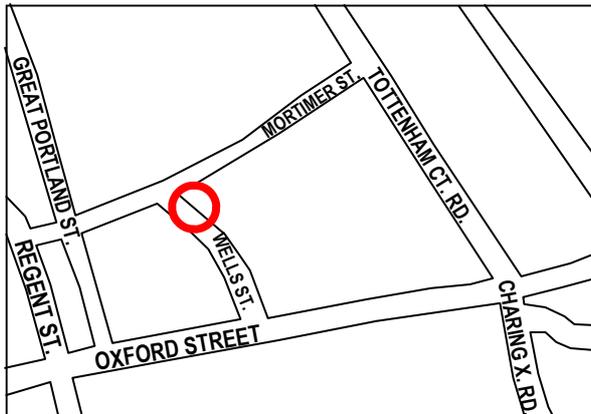
The usual format is to start at 10:00 for the formal business of the AGM, then quickly move into “conference mode” for the remainder of the day, normally concluding at around 16:00.

Coffee is included, and there is a café nearby where lunches can be purchased.

If you would like to contribute a presentation, please contact Roddy Urquhart for details—07717 433237.

Our Patron, Lord Howe is hoping to be able to make an appearance, and other VIPs have been invited.

Please make every effort to attend—it is quite encouraging to spend some time with like-minded people.



Don't forget that VBM (A Very British Mess) can be ordered from your library using ISBN 0750310146, and is now listed on Amazon with a picture of the front cover.

NEWSLETTERS: POSTAL OR EMAIL



This edition of *UKMA News* is the third successive issue to be posted out to the majority of members, and marks the end of the trial period. I have had a mixed response as expected, with some members saying they like to open an envelope and read a ready-printed version, while others prefer to open the email attachment and either print the newsletter themselves or read it on the screen. As we want to keep the membership informed as much as possible, the main deciding factor should be which format you are more likely to read.

Members who have expressed a preference for the ready-printed and posted version will continue to receive the newsletter in this format unless they indicate otherwise.

However, from now on, those who have not stated a preference for either the printed or emailed version will, by default, receive their *UKMA news* by email. *Postal members will continue to receive their UKMA news by post.*

Send us an article!

Members are invited to submit articles for *UKMA News*, if they have a relevant subject they feel would make a good article for the newsletter. Please contact the editor.

Edited and produced by Phil Durden

Do you have any comments about this newsletter, its contents, layout, etc.?

Do you have any suggestions for articles for future newsletters?

Do you prefer postal newsletters or electronic?

Please let me know! phil@durden.clara.co.uk